

## **Gwendolyn Brooks**

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Throughout history, people have been discriminated against because of the color of their skin. African Americans were often held back from their dreams just because of this reason. Gwendolyn Brooks was one of those people, but she overcame many obstacles to achieve her dream. She was the first African American to receive a Pulitzer Prize for Poetry and is best known for her poetic descriptions of African American city life.

Born on June 7, 1917, in Topeka, Kansas, Gwendolyn Brooks was the eldest child of Keziah, a school teacher, and David Brooks, a janitor. Later that year, she moved to Chicago where her two siblings were born. Her parents often read to her and encouraged her to do well in school but she was a shy girl. She later said, “I am a writer, not a talker.” Most of her childhood was spent writing poems. Her friends and family even called her the “female Paul Lawrence Dunbar,” who was a famous African American poet. Brooks received many compliments on her writings. By the age of sixteen she had written over 75 poems.

After graduating from Wilson Junior College in 1936, Brooks worked as a director of publicity for a youth organization of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. She also participated in readings and workshops at Chicago’s South Side Community Art Center, writing a verse that eventually appeared in her first published volume, *A Street in Bronzeville*. In 1939, she married Henry L. Blakeley, another young writer and they had two children, Henry Jr. and Nora Blakely. Brooks continued to write poetry while the children were asleep or later while they were

in school. A second collection titled *Annie Allen* was released in 1949. Then, in 1950, Brooks was awarded a Pulitzer Prize for poetry, becoming the first African American to be granted this honor.

Gwendolyn Brooks's work from this period contains descriptions mostly of African Americans involved in their day-to-day city activities. The critics labeled her early work as intellectual and scholarly. Although these poems speak out against the oppression of blacks and women, some of them have another meaning. In many of the poems she criticized the prejudice that African American people have toward one another. In *Annie Allen*, she examines the traditional roles of mother and father, and husband and wife, concluding that they can be somewhat damaging to those who try to live up to their ideals. These messages were more hidden though.

In 1967, Brooks's work achieved a new tone and vision. She changed to more simple writings so her themes could come across more strongly. Some of these works included *In the Mecca*, *Riot* and *Aloneness*. These works are much more direct and are designed to increase the reader's level of racial awareness. Brooks now favored free verse rather than the traditional poetic forms.

During the 1970s, Brooks taught poetry at numerous institutions for higher learning including Northeastern Illinois University and University of Wisconsin at Madison. While her concern for African Americans and hope for racial harmony was the main subject of her verse, in the early 1970s, this was replaced in the later 1970s with a sense of disappointment from the lack of unity among the members of the Civil Rights Movement. She made comments such as, "Don't let anyone call you a minority if you're black or Hispanic or belong to some other ethnic group. You're not less than anybody

else.” This was reflected in *Beckonings*, where she urged African Americans to break free from the controls of white American society and seemed to favor violence as an acceptable way to achieve freedom.

In her later years, Brooks spent time encouraging others to write by sponsoring writers’ workshops in Chicago and poetry contests at prisons. She took her poetry to her people, continuing to test its worth by reading and speaking in taverns, lounges, and other public places. In 1985, she was named as the poetry consultant for the Library of Congress. In 1990, her works were guaranteed a permanent home when Chicago State University established the Gwendolyn Brooks Center on its campus. She continued to write, publishing *Children Coming Home* and *Blacks*, both published in 1992. She also continued to inspire others to write, focusing on young children by speaking and giving poetry readings at schools all around the country.

In 1997, on her eightieth birthday, Gwendolyn Brooks was honored with tributes from Chicago to Washington, D. C. Although she received many tributes, perhaps the best came from her publisher saying, “She is undoubtedly one of the top one hundred writers in the world. She has been a chronicler of black life and almost a legend in her own time. Gwendolyn Brooks died of cancer at her home in Chicago on December 3, 2000 at the age of 83. [From Harold Bloom, ed. *Gwendolyn Brooks*, 2000; Gwendolyn Brooks, *Selected Poems*, 2006; George E. Kent, “A Life of Gwendolyn Brooks.” <http://www.notablebiographies.com/Br-Ca/Brooks-Gwendolyn.html> (Oct. 12, 2008); Jone Lewis, “Gwendolyn Brooks.” <http://womenhistory.about.com/brooksgwendolyn.htm> (Oct. 12, 2008); D. H. Melhem, *Gwendolyn Brooks*, 1987; and Kenny Williams, “Brooks Life and Career: The Oxford

Companion to African-American Literature.”

[http://www.english.edu/maps/poets/a\\_f/brooks/life.htm](http://www.english.edu/maps/poets/a_f/brooks/life.htm) (Oct. 12, 2008).]